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"The sky has entered our senses": Paintings by Etel Adnan

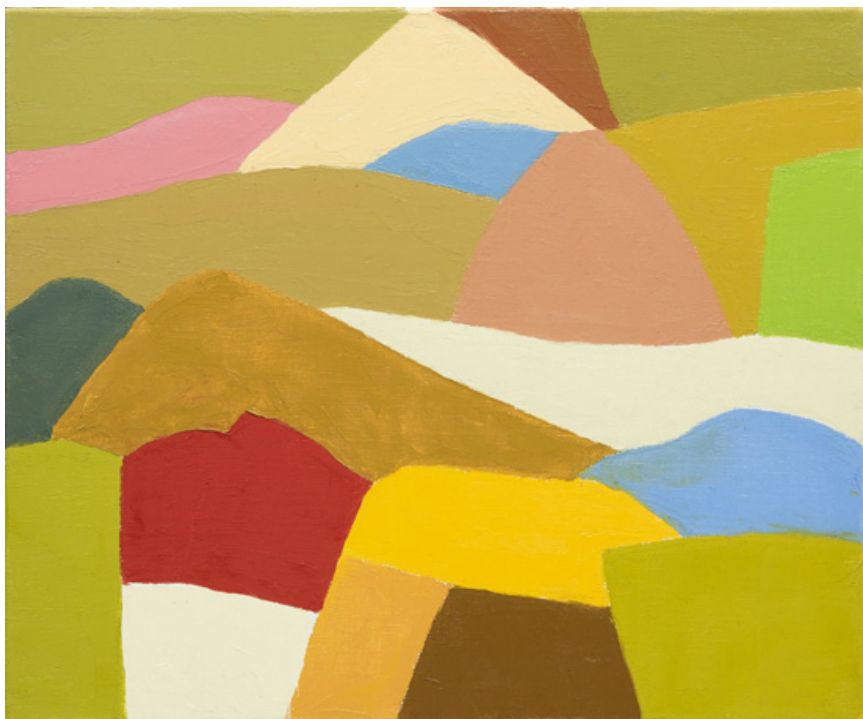
by Margaret Graham

Etel Adnan at Galerie Lelong

April 2 – May 8, 2015

528 W 26th Street (between 10th and 11th avenues)

New York, 212 315 0470



Etel Adnan, *Untitled*, 2014. Oil on canvas, 13 x 16.1 inches. Copyright of the Artist, Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, New York.

A work of art being so much more than its physical makeup, you can't classify an artist simply by her knack for manipulating materials. And yet, when paired with a nimble poetic sensibility and a fervent desire to plumb the farthest corners of human experience, aptitude can occasionally ascend to genius. Such is the case of artist and poet Etel Adnan, who at the august age of 90 is finally getting the attention she deserves. The show of her work now on view at Galerie Lelong — a tidy selection of paintings, pastels, tapestries, *makimono* (Japanese folding books), and a single film — speaks to two things: Adnan's endless fascination with "the miracle of matter itself,"^[1] and her unshakeable belief that there is much more to this world than matter, accompanied by a passionate impulse to explore what lives both within and beyond it. Adnan's art is a love song to the Universe, and it is our great fortune to have been invited here to bear witness.

Adnan's semi-abstract compositions are compact, often no larger than 13 x 16 inches, presenting patchwork vistas built up out of numerous teeming and opaque parts. They look not meticulously designed but more intuitively improvised, each distinguished by the brusque yet sensitive juxtaposition of thick bands of color. The paintings in particular are very worldly, yet the planet they evoke is not one riddled with toil and grit (as depicted in Adnan's literary works such as *The Arab Apocalypse* and *Sitt-Marie Rose*) but rather a relaxed, clarified version as seen through the eyes of someone who has glimpsed the bigger picture: mountains, ravines, the skyline, the sea, all rendered in a controlled palette of piquant hues. In *Untitled* (2014), for example, uneven slabs of taxicab yellow, olive green, rich caramel, and tawny are tempered by a stout sliver of bright cornflower blue; the recipe is unusual and arresting. But the mood is, above all, self-possessed. The images elicit a solid, sturdy calm. They do not move, or when they do, it is by a slow surge of



Etel Adnan, Untitled, 2015. Oil on canvas, 10 5/8 x 13 3/4 inches. Copyright of the Artist, Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, New York.

coarse abutting forms or sharp diagonals, careful collisions propelled by broad, textural strokes. Like tectonic plates that shift mere inches over thousands of years, peaks growing slowly skyward.

The internal sense of gravity bestows urgency on these small surfaces and turns them into something other, and more tangibly compelling, than mere decorative objects. Adnan applies her paints with a palette knife, and always on a table or flat surface rather than an easel. As a result her images look putty-ish, almost edible, nourishing even, and somehow more substantial than your average spread. *Untitled* (1989), the oldest painting included in the show, is especially ripe. Where mossy green pushes up against creamy citron yellow, the two colors are rendered more distinct, yet also manage to merge into a dynamic structure that encompasses the whole. Sky blue, crackled black, tan, Kelly green, and a smear of dusty lilac are at once offset and unified by two dashes of raspberry red, an indiscriminate equal sign. The three pastels (all 1970), conversely, are confections scribbled on paper, their many squarish harlequin morsels coming together with "the suddenness of an island in one's life."^[2] The total image is lovely, but forceful and fluid in the way a single, soft line is, not unlike the inky trails that delineate the unfurled *makimono*.



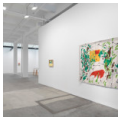
Etel Adnan, Untitled, 1989. Oil on canvas, 14 x 18 inches. Copyright of the Artist, Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, New York.

The Universe keeps creeping in, mainly in the color combinations, which are pleasantly disarming and never compromise. The tapestries seem to bustle and buzz with pulsating tones of lime green, blood red, and ochre, while the paintings are more poised and minimal: two milky tones of blue cut with hillocks of tender peach and elephant gray. Adnan's whites are never flat, but dimensional, tinged with the slightest hint of puce or beige. She is a smart, conceptual colorist. Her sense of art, the seemingly impossible act of reflecting the subjective self and the objective cosmos simultaneously, is moored in the future. She is always reaching forward, though not in a spirit of prophecy, but of hope. Her work may share certain aesthetic qualities with that of, say, Arthur Dove or Hans Hofmann, but it carries an attitude all its own. When describing her artistic process, Adnan once said: "What you do is make your composition. You trust your... shapes, your gestures. You trust that something beyond that will come through even if you don't know exactly what."^[3] This is an artist who dares to push beyond the empirical, adjusting and challenging the maps we've made to navigate our selves, our world, and what we think we know about them. The experience, if somewhat troubling, is terrific.

[1] Adnan, Etel. *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*. Sausalito, CA: Post-Apollo Press, 1986. 63.

[2] Adnan, Etel. *Seasons*. Sausalito, CA: Post-Apollo Press, 2008. 30.

[3] Weaver, Kathleen. "The Non Worldly World: Conversation with Etel Adnan." *Poetry Flash*, May 1986 (No. 158).



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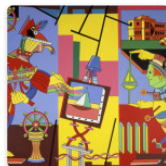


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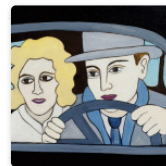
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